

Magical Objects (on the work of the ARKA group)

At the end of the road where I live in Gateshead is a small patch of grass that serves as a concentrated refuge for the community's errant litter. The accumulated waste includes a couple of empty bottles of Lucozade, a discarded can of super-strength cider, a crumpled bag of crisps, a half-eaten Burger King and some ripped up scratch cards. Beyond our propensity for salt, sugar and fat what does this patch of useless space tell us about ourselves? The urban landscape is designed for speed and fluidity; of people, objects and ultimately money. Here, on this patch of land in Gateshead, speed abuts slowness. The velocity of consumption and instant gratification — alcohol, gambling and fast food — meets its very real material end point. Items that took seconds to consume could take over 500 years to degrade.

The rubbish described above is a form of urban cholesterol, filling up the streets and slowing down the efficient liquidity of modern capitalism. Neon pink, nylon blue, acidic green. Each item proclaims its previous, and now elapsed, need for visual appeal. These mechanised colours are antithetical to the tertiary hues of the body and the landscape and are the common chromatic preferences of the cut price and the expedient — their momentary value now transpired. This anthropogenic material — of the toxic landscape, irreversibly marked by human action — can be seen, in some regards, to form a type of counter-archive. While the repositories of the wanted and valued are kept in temperature controlled environments most of this stuff will end up buried in a landfill. If societal memory is embalmed in monuments and museum collections then how do we start to perform an anthropology for the discarded and unwanted? It is rubbish, rather than riches, that can perhaps form a more fully rounded portrait of our lives. The collaborative work of Ben Jeans Houghton and Matthew de Kersaint Giraudeau, operating under the collective name the ARKA group, perform the task of speculative anthropologists.

For their new exhibition, *Votives*, the artists sourced much of their material from the city streets, supplementing their formal vocabulary with items bought from Poundland, B&Q and various charity shops. The materials list is extensive; including pipe insulation, polystyrene balls, broken glass, sweets, takeaway cartons, found seeds and plants, fencing, balloons, bicycle inner tubes and various types of tape (gaffa, sellotape, electrical and hazard) among many other items. Anything small and at hand — the pick-upable — becomes a potential material. The organic and mechanic, industrial and domestic coalesce, creating a multiplicity of new relations. A votive offering, of course, is a stand in for something else — a promise. But what exactly is being offered here? Are the artists gifting each other something? Are the ARKA group giving something to the viewer? The

work offers a moment of exchange and with it, the translation of an object into a complex chain of significances.

The intimately scaled sculptures scattered across the floor recall a miniaturised landscape. I'm reminded of Gabriel Orozco's famous *Island within an Island* (1993) where the artist mimics the New York skyline with rubbish found on the street. The iconic Twin Towers and surrounding architecture are mirrored by pieces of cardboard and wooden off-cuts. In both Orozco and the ARKA group's work the subject and landscape become conjoined, with the artists intervening in and inscribing the urban environment with something more provisional and personal. Rubbish is the physical sediment of an economic and social system that now defies representation; it is the opposite of abstraction. It is the dead end of a network that insists on speed. Take cardboard; it is the material of packaging and protection, it is a discarded material, the flip side of consumerist allure. It is a material that is often associated with urban environments and homelessness yet also, in domestic spaces, with hastily constructed kids' dens. It is a material that marks easily, bearing the biography of its own transit. Rubbish is a material that refuses to go away, untranscended matter that counters the persistent rhetoric of the immaterial velocity of global finance.

If we can view the constellation of elements in *Votives* as a form of archive then its taxonomies are largely formal and personal. While the materials are promiscuous the sculptures, the product of collaborative making within the studio, feel highly attuned to art historical languages — a kind of down-sized Phyllida Barlow or a domestically scaled Jason Rhoades. Historically, artists' use of trash aesthetics attempted to extend and destabilise common aesthetic categories by infecting the high language of Modernism with a more base or scatological approach. Rubbish is uncontainable and dispersed; it is a leaky visual metaphor. Rubbish, as noted by Barry Allen in *The Ethical Artifact*, has many different synonyms including: junk, garbage, refuse, debris and waste. He adds "Trash is more like junk than garbage. Garbage is organic. It's formless and stinks ... trash like junk, is often clean, a matter of well-made paper, plastic, or metal. Like junk, trash includes the malfunctioning, failed, burned out and obsolete..." The slipperiness is etymological as well as visual and metaphorical.

Writing in *Stuff Theory: Everyday Objects, Radical Materialism* (2014), Maurizia Boscagli articulates junk as a type of lost object and "material ex-tabula... dropped from the networks that give it economic and affective significance". It is an object that is unanchored from use value and fixed taxonomies and, as such, makes it perfect for artistic intervention. Through the artwork, the artist finds ways of re-using the materials and rehabilitating various values (cultural, aesthetic,

economic) along the way. Writing in *Paraphernalia* (2011) and taking his lead from J.J Gibson's understanding of object affordance (how designed items invite a particular use) Steven Conner articulates "magical objects" as "suggestive of multiple affordances". In other words, if in everyday life we act in accordance with objects — sitting on a chair, or picking up a mug for instance — then in making art an artist works against the habitual, applying inventive alterations to denote numerous affordances.

Most of the sculptures are displayed on the floor, completing a narrative tautology (many of these materials were found on the ground). Importantly, the placement of the sculptures encourage the viewer to undertake the same kind of ambulant *dérive* the artists undertook when sourcing the materials. One can draw links to Arman's work of the late fifties and early sixties when the artist would stuff vitrines full of detritus from specific locations. The refuse would form an archeological portrait of a given space or person, becoming a time capsule of the quotidian. Antithetical to the more celebratory nature of American Pop Art, Arman's prophetic work — operating as a type of counter-archive — foresaw the material abundance of emerging post-war consumer culture. Where Arman's vitrines are inchoate, the ARKA group's sculptures are highly formalised — the subjectivity and aesthetic sensibility of the artists is foregrounded.

Artists stake out new uses (and values) for material excess, they bring it back into alternate forms of circulation, focusing on the slippages and hiccups of the everyday. The ARKA group turn our attention to the bottom end of consumer capitalism, the stuff that often exists just outside of dominant value systems. The fake, the tatty, the tacky and the bargain basement — these items offer equivocal aesthetic pleasures, they are not quite ugly and not entirely beautiful. En-masse the sculptures suggest that as scavengers, consumers and subjects, it is possible to bend this material to something more personal and intimate — to use our imagination to intervene in the psychic flow of capital. To paraphrase the artist David Wojnarowicz, perhaps we can view the last frontier for radical gestures as the imagination.

George Vasey
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